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Substance Abuse and Physicians

"Take two aspirins and call me in the morning," the common cure-all for simple ailments from your trustworthy physician. Little do people know that over the course of a physician's career, between eight and twelve percent of them abuse prescription drugs. Additionally, approximately seven percent of physicians currently abuse substances on a daily basis. This is a growing concern due to the fact that the lives of thousands of people are in the hands of these impaired physicians. There are many factors that contribute to substance abuse among physicians and it is vital that society is aware of the signs and symptoms associated with abuse to prevent the devastating effects. Once the abuse is detected it is imperative that treatment begin immediately.

First, there are multiple factors that contribute to substance abuse among physicians. It is common for physicians to provide self-treatment with prescription drugs. Possessing the knowledge and experience to make an educated decision about treatments for illnesses and diseases makes it convenient for physicians to diagnose themselves. Why go through the hassle of making a doctor's appointment? Although this situation is beneficial at the start of a minor ailment, this practice can lead to trouble down the road. Easy access to prescription medication makes it possible for them to obtain the medicine they desire without being questioned.

"Doctors with more physical access tend to self-treat more frequently than those with less access. Similarly, those who prescribe controlled substances more often also tend to take them more

often" (Hughes). Clearly, there is a related trend that correlates with access to prescription medication and abuse of these substances by physicians. Another contributing factor to substance abuse among physicians is long hours of practice. Many physicians turn to prescription drugs to help them make it through the sometimes long and grueling shifts. These drugs can assist them in maintaining their focus and ability to stay awake as they continue to work. Lastly, high stress and exposure to trauma are both factors that contribute to substance abuse. It is common for physicians to take medicine to help them relax and forget about the detrimental incidents they deal with throughout the work day. As levels of trauma rise and stress increases, it is difficult to remain mentally strong and focused on the upcoming patient case rather than dwelling on past circumstances. Certainly there are many factors that contribute to substance abuse and physicians.

It is vital to recognize the warning signs and symptoms of substance abuse to not only protect the physician, but also to protect patients. "Physicians with substance abuse problems rarely exhibit the obvious symptoms of intoxication, such as slurred speech, pinpoint pupils, or bizarre behavior" (Cicala). It is necessary for society to be aware of their masked behaviors in order to prevent a tragedy. One warning sign of substance abuse is the frequent closing and locking of the door to their office. By doing so, the physician is able to fulfill their desire to be left undisturbed as they escape reality and fall into the temporary world the drug creates. Another indicator of abuse is a decrease in the physician's quality of work. Focus on their professional career is lost as they become occupied with the pleasure found by taking prescription medicine. Priorities become rearranged as things that were once important, lose value and fall to the bottom of their list. As a result, their work ethic diminishes which is quickly followed by quality. "One time I overdosed and put my head on the operating table next to the

bypass patient. I had nodded off and was fast asleep. The surgeons and others made light of it, and I excused my aberrant behavior by saying I was overworked and exhausted" (McCall). It is certain that no patient would want to know that their surgeon fell asleep while conducting their own bypass surgery. This example of poor work quality can not only cost the patient their life, but also the physician their career. As priorities are rearranged, marital problems arise as focus diverts to the life behind their closed office door. Loss of sexual interest and recurrent arguments are symptoms that contribute to domestic mishap as a consequence of the drug intake. Additional warning signals of abuse are frequent job changes with unexplained time gaps between jobs. This occurs in order to prevent suspicion from arising about unusual behavior. Finally, deterioration and memory lapses transpire as a result of the overuse of the specific medication as it takes a physical toll on the body. As one can see, there are several warning signs that physicians conceal from society.

Next, there are multiple effects of substance abuse among physicians. First, it can destroy the physician's and family's reputation. A negative connotation of the physician and family in the community can be acquired as the physician's mood swings and change in behavior become increasingly evident. Additionally, if word gets out about the abuse, their reputation can be permanently damaged which can pressure them into seeking a new place of residence. Physical and mental damage to the physician is another effect of substance abuse since it is known that over time the abuse of a substance will take a toll on the body. Although physicians have access to controlled substances, it does not make them invincible to the medication. They suffer the consequences in the same way that every other human being is affected. Abuse does not only physically harm the physician, but can also cause lifetime mental distress. In Charles Martin's novel, When Crickets Cry, the night the protagonist's wife dies he was in a medicinal

induced profound sleep caused by an overdose of medication he took to help himself deal with stress and an arduous work schedule. For the rest of his life, he blamed himself for his wife's death since he did not wake up when she critically needed his assistance. Over the course of the novel, he constantly wondered if he did not take the medication that night, would his wife still be alive (264). Clearly, this was a serious consequence of abusing prescription drugs. Finally, the physician can harm their patients if they are under the influence of drugs. These drugs and their side effects can alter their judgment which can, as a result, affect the patient for the rest of their life.

Luckily, there are multiple methods of treatment for physicians under the influence of prescription medication. According to Mr. Roger S. Cicala, MD, treatment is executed in three phases. The first phase typically begins in the hospital and focus is drawn on the physical symptoms of abuse, including surmounting cravings and treating withdrawal. This phase can last anywhere from a couple of days to two weeks. Physicians are then moved to a "residence recovery" location where the intermediate and late phases of treatment occur. They typically share a residence with other physicians in the same situation where they are able to develop a support system. The intermediate phase first begins when education, behavior alteration, emotional and psychological therapy, are implemented. Participation in Narcotics Anonymous and similar self-help recovery programs are also included in this phase. The final phase involves a program where almost fully recovered physicians collaborate with physicians in the early recovery stage. This allows the physicians to obtain awareness of their disease through examining its influence on others in the same condition. After completing the entire treatment process successfully, the physician is able to return to practice. Fortunately, such programs are

created to assist the physician in overcoming their disease and eventually integrating them back into the work force.

Substance abuse among physicians is a growing concern affecting people of all ages. There are multiple factors that contribute to this abuse including self-treatment, easy access to medication, long work days, high stress, and exposure to trauma. Symptoms of abuse consist of but are not limited to recurrent isolation, a decrease in quality of work, domestic strife, frequent job changes, and memory lapses. It is necessary for society to be aware of these symptoms to prevent devastating effects such as injuring the patient, damaging the physician's and family's reputation, and causing mental and physical harm to the physician. Luckily there are methods of treatment that effectively incorporate the physician back into their careers when the process is successfully fulfilled. Treatment centers have experienced success rates as great as ninety percent; therefore, it is vital for physicians to undergo treatment when assistance is needed. Clearly, it is imperative that the issue of substance abuse and physicians is addressed so society does not have to suffer the devastating consequences as a result.

Works Cited

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